The Photograph

Though Disappointing, It Has a Happy Result

By ALLAN P. AMES

The old Kimball house stood alone on the side of the hill. Around it the acres that one generation had cleared and two others had profitably tilled during the golden age of New England agriculture were growing up to birch and white pine. But the hilltop pasture still furnished grazing for Betsy, the aged Holstein, and Jael, the pot-bellied mare, sole survivors of the stock that once crowded the white-washed barn, while in the garden grew potatoes, corn, turnips, beets and the other hardy truck that wintered in a corner of the big cellar and enabled the Kimball "girls" to sit by their air tight stove and watch with unconcern the storms that blocked the roads and sometimes shut them off from the store at the Center for days at a time.

Breakfast over and the dishes washed, the sisters went into the garden. Every pleasant day until the sun rose high and hot they worked there. Blue cotton gowns faded by constant washing covered their thin, bowed figures as they stooped over the onion bed or with the hand cultivator scratched the earth between the hills of beans and corn. Blue gingham sunbonnets protected their delicately wrinkled faces.

Miss Binley, seeing them for the first time, paused to study and admire. Against the background of yellow green cornstalks their bent figures stood out in harmonious relief. In the foreground the whitewashed fence, the prim flower beds and the old house with its rotting shingles and weather washed green blinds contributed a setting that appealed irresistibly to her artist soul.

For Miss Binley was an amateur photographer. She seldom walked abroad without her camera, but unfortunately this was one of the rare mornings when she had left her camera at home.

"Oh, Mr. Holbrook," cried the girl regretfully, "see those perfectly dear old women in that onion patch. What a genre study! I've often said it never was safe to go anywhere without a camera."

"I might run back and fetch it," suggested the carrier meekly.

"N-no," she replied reluctantly. "It's too far. Probably we can get them some other time. I'm going to speak to them."

Young Holbrook watched with adoring admiration the process by which the girl penetrated the barriers of New England reserve. Before the three women had conversed five minutes something of Miss Binley's own abundant youth and enthusiasm began to sparkle in the faded eyes of the sisters.

"Oh, Marthy, don't you wish we could have ours taken again? We haven't had our likenesses made since we were girls. Remember, Marthy, you were thutty and I was thutty-five. You were a mighty putty girl in those days, Marthy."

"Oh, g'long," commanded her younger sister.

"It used to be a turrible lot of trouble," continued Phoebe. "We had to sit puffickly still for five minutes—couldn't stir, and it seemed like five hours."

"You wouldn't have to sit still at all now," said Miss Binley eagerly. "The process is instantaneous."

Eager assent was on the lips of Miss Phoebe, but her sterner sister forestalled her.

"That's very kind of you, miss, but we couldn't think of putting you to so much trouble."

Familiar with the fundamental characteristic of the older New England generation, Miss Binley advanced cautiously. Already in her artist mind she saw the print she would make—a marvelous study of two gaunt figures wringing an unwilling toll from the harsh mountain soil. It was the subject she had been looking for all summer to enter in the fall exhibit of her camera club at home. "Oh, it won't trouble me in the least," she replied guardedly. "If you knew how I love to take pictures you would understand. Would you be here in the garden at this time tomorrow?"

"Yes," answered Martha, yielding. "But wouldn't you rather take us in the house. Do folks ever have their pictures taken outdoors?"

"The light is much better outside," explained Miss Binley. "And, besides, I wouldn't think of keeping you from your work. I'll come and take some snapshots of you just as you are—weeding the onions."

"You can come with me tomorrow," she said to Holbrook. "I had promised to drive with Johnny Larcon, but all engagements are off in the face of an epoch making chance like this."

The next morning brought weather perfect alike for pedestrianism and photography. The day was cool, and a thin haze tempered the rays of the mountain sun. Miss Binley ran down the steps to meet him, radiant with anticipation, and as he received the big camera from her hands Holbrook thrilled with the thought of another moving at her side.

"There's some one in the garden," said the young man as the last turn in the road brought them in sight of their destination. "But they don't accord with my recollection of the old ladies. Holy smoke!" gasped the youth. "It's they, all right, but no wonder we didn't recognize them."

Miss Binley gazed, speechless in horrified amazement, as her two subjects approached the gate. Gone were the picturesque gowns and the sunbonnets of faded blue. In their place the Kimballs had donned a veritable riot of modistry. Their costumes paid tribute to the varying fashions of a full half century.

But the faded countenances of the Kimballs showed naught but pride and satisfaction, slightly tinged with embarrassment. "We set up most all night sortin' things over and decidin' what to wear," announced Miss Phoebe when they came within speaking distance. "Of course we wanted to do you credit, seein' you were so kind. These silk mitts cost a sight of money when Brother Hiram brought them from Concord. They're pretty well darned now, but all the mendin's on the inside where it don't show. Don't Marthy look scrumptious? She found that silk skirt she had made up for the Frost weddin' most as good as new."

Holbrook welcomed the old lady's volubility, for it was plain that for once his companion was at a loss for words. When Miss Binley finally found her voice it was so queer and strained that he scarcely recognized it:

"I—I'm sorry you went to all the trouble. Really, it wasn't at all necessary. In fact"—

"In fact," broke in Holbrook hurriedly—"nevertheless it was awfully good of you to fix up so. That certainly is a fine piece of goods, Miss Martha. It will show up splendidly in the photograph."

He rambled on thus, hardly realizing what he said, anxious only to cover the bitter disappointment that was written on Miss Binley's face so clearly that he felt it must be evident to all.

"'Twarn't the least bit of trouble," insisted Martha. "We really enjoyed fixin' things over, didn't we, Phoebe?"

Holbrook was wondering how long his powers of invention would stand the strain when, after a brief and—to him—uncomfortable pause, Miss Martha suggested timidly, "We're all ready, miss, any time you say."

To Holbrook's intense relief this appeal brought Miss Binley to a sense of the situation. "Oh, yes," she said, rather wildly, "your clothes are beautiful. I'm going to send you each a dozen prints so that you can have plenty to give your friends."

Declining a hospitable invitation to stop for a "snack and a cup of tea," the girl and the young man somehow got through their farewells and walked away over the hill, leaving the wearied but thoroughly delighted old ladies gazing after them from their station by the front gate. In silence Holbrook lugged the camera, and without a word Miss Binley trudged beside him until the old house and its grotesquely clad occupants were hidden by the bend in the road. Then the girl said:

"Would you mind sitting here in the shade a minute? I really believe I'm a bit tired."

Immediately the youth was all anxious inquiry and suggestion:

"It must have been the sun. You have to be careful in these mountains. If you don't mind waiting here alone for a couple of minutes I'll hurry back and see if the old ladies won't lend me some kind of a rig to drive you back to the hotel, or maybe you'll let me carry you back to their house."

"Don't be ridiculous," ordered Miss Binley, with a slightly hysterical laugh. "There isn't a thing the matter with me." Then, noting his amazement, she burst out desperately: "I'm just fearfully disappointed, that's all. I don't believe I ever was so disappointed before in my life. But that's only part. I'm horribly ashamed of myself, too—even more ashamed than disappointed. Oh, I believe I'm the meanest girl in the whole state of New Hampshire."

"Why—er—er"— he started to protest.

"Don't pretend you don't comprehend," she interrupted. "You're ashamed of me too. You know you are. No; let me finish," she insisted, when he made as if to deny. "The worst of all is that even now, when I understand how mean and selfish it is to feel so, I'm just overwhelmed with disappointment still. You can't understand—nobody could but an artist. My heart was set on a picture of those dear old things in their delicious working clothes. And when I saw how they had gone and spoiled everything I felt so badly I didn't even want to conceal it."

Holbrook gazed with awe and quickening heartbeat upon a new and holier divinity—with quivering lips and dewy lashes, irresistible in her sweet repentance. In another moment he was on his knees on the grass beside her. Without hesitation, naturally as if he had done it as often as he had dreamed of doing it, his arm slipped about her. Just as naturally her head somehow found a comfortable place on his shoulder. Her hat fell off, and he kissed her shining hair.

"I do understand," he whispered, although there was none but the mountains to listen. "I understand, dear. I may be an ignoramus about photography and art, but I'm mighty well acquainted with Tommy Holbrook, and I know he knows that you're the sweetest, most unselfish, most— What I want to say is that I want to make carrying your camera my life job," he concluded desperately.

Miss Binley sat suddenly erect. An answer hovered on her lips, but faded into a smile as she picked up a black, leather covered object from the grass beside her and placed it in Holbrook's hands.